

Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre makes good on promise of horror with 'Misery'

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"Misery," directed by Miguel Reyna and based on the Stephen King psychological horror, sees Ian Dyer as Paul Sheldon, left, and Annie Wilkes, played by Manirose Bobisuthi, lead the stage. Performances run Thursdays to Sundays through Nov 1st (Credit: Davis Banta)

How close have you been to someone so obsessed they would commit heinous acts of cruelty in the name of their fixation? Nightmares came true opening weekend of the Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre's "Misery" as the character Annie Wilkes, played by Manirose Bobisuthi, stormed up the stairs of the small black box theater with her winter coat brushing the shoulders of those sitting close to the center aisle. As the play progressed, the vision of her madness focused into a beam of darkness shooting into the hearts and minds of the audience. To look away was impossible; to witness her sadism was pure misery.

Ian Dyer plays Paul Sheldon, the fictional author of the "Misery Chastain" series of historical romances, who falls victim to the whims of a country nurse after crashing his Mustang in the middle of a Colorado winter storm. He wakes up from being unconscious only to find himself in the clutches of "his No. 1 fan." Dyer gives a heroic performance as a writer stuck in an unthinkable situation. In order to gain his freedom, he must write a convincing sequel to a series of novels that has already concluded with the main character's death. In reviving Misery, Sheldon buys himself time to regain some strength and formulate a plan. Dyer brings the audience along on this excruciating journey with generous helpings of vulnerability and charm.



Annie Wilkes played by Manirose Bobisuthi tends to Ian Dyer as Paul Sheldon after his crash in the Colorado wilderness. (Credit: Davis Banta)

He is, and we are, however, in the grasp of someone whose mind has abandoned the realm of the reasonable. Bobisuthi plays the role of Annie Wilkes with the horsepower of a Ford Bronco, a vehicle more suited to the rugged terrain of a Colorado winter than Sheldon's flashy Mustang. Wilkes is the master of her domain, living singly, well-adapted to her corner of the world. Although she is self-

sufficient, she has a deep passion for escaping reality through the romances penned by Sheldon. When she discovers his car crash, she brings him back to her home to nurse him back to health and to put him back to work.

The brilliance of the story comes from the reversal of stereotypical roles of 1987 U.S. culture, the setting of Stephen King's novel. The famous and successful male author from New York is at the mercy of the working-class female nurse living in the countryside. The elite writer involuntarily serves the common reader, as power dynamics are inverted due to the circumstances of their situation, and Dyer and Bobisuthi play this psychodrama with full commitment. Sheldon is left with nothing but his powers of seduction to try and gain some traction as Wilkes micromanages his every move. The struggle between genders is matched with a clash between types of intelligence. Wilkes has the practical wisdom of a country woman; Sheldon has the guile of an urbane writer.

Brad Roades plays Buster, the local sheriff, who is investigating the disappearance of this famous author. This is a commentary on the contrast between the local and the national.

The FBI has given up, declaring Sheldon dead, but Buster is following a hunch. In scratching his own itch, he works his way into the mystery of what is happening at Wilkes' home. This good-natured sheriff is played with warmth and



Local sheriff Buster portrayed by Brad Roades continues to investigate Paul Sheldon's disappearance in the stage adaptation of Misery by Stephen King. (Credit: Davis Banta)

self-confident competence. In the presence of Wilkes' evil plot, this character offers a welcome moral contrast.

Director Miguel Reyna has done it. With a set that is creepy and cozy at the same time, he has created a transfixing dramatic experience. For just short of two hours, the audience cannot stop watching as the scenes unfold, the tension builds and the result is unadulterated "Misery." This is a play unlike any other I have seen in Santa Cruz, and it is not to be missed.

"Misery" continues performances Thursdays to Sundays through Nov. 1 at the Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre at 1001 Center St. Due to graphic depictions of violence, shows are only for ages 16 and older. Tickets are \$35 for general admission, \$32 for seniors and students, and Thursday shows are two-for-one with promo code "2for1" (no spaces). Find tickets at: ci.ovationtix.com/35410/production/1248399.